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ABSTRACT

Realizing the importance of parents in the educational process, several states have launched campaigns to involve parents with their children in home reading activities. Using these programs as examples, the Wentzville R-IV School District (Missouri) devised and initiated "Spring Into Reading," a plan for encouraging parental involvement in leisure time reading activities. The program consisted of an 8-week contractual agreement between the parent and child to spend 15 minutes per day, 5 days a week in a reading activity. Rewards such as pine seedlings or stickers were given throughout the program as incentives to keep the children reading. To start the program a time-line was developed that clearly listed all of the important events in the program, such as halfway points, dates that parent letters would go home, dates of incentive distributions, and so forth. Student weekly record sheets were also maintained and collected at the end of the program. Each participant who completed the program received a certificate of accomplishment signed by the superintendent, their building principal, and classroom teacher, as well as a coupon for free french fries from a local food franchise. Although some parents objected to the rigorous time requirements, the contractual agreement, and certain awards, the overwhelming response was positive. (HOD)

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"Spring Into Reading": A Parent-Child Reading Participation Program.

A program designed to get parents involved with their children in home reading activities.

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Is reading becoming a lost leisure time activity for school age children? What can parents and the schools do to encourage recreational reading?

A study by Cooney (1970) indicates that typically pre-schoolers spend more time watching television than they spend in the classroom during their first five years of schooling. It has been found that a strong, positive relationship exists between the amount of television viewing by parents and their children (Leifert, 1974). Furthermore, it was reported that children who had a tendency to express negative feelings about reading came from families who owned more televisions (Lamme and Olmsted, 1976).

Realizing the importance of parents in the educational process, several states have launched campaigns to involve parents with their children in home reading activities. New York State's "Parents as Reading Partners" is one such program that has achieved statewide participation and national recognition. In Missouri, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has taken the first step toward involving parents in the reading educational process by stating an objective of the school reading goals to be the development of reading as a leisure time activity. To achieve this objective, several St. Louis County schools have

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initiated home reading programs. They are the Pershing Elementary program in University City (St. Louis Post Dispatch, 1981) and the "Warm Up to Reading" (Ward, 1977) Ferguson-Florissant.

With a view toward joining in this state-wide effort, we reviewed several of these programs. With these programs as samples, we devised and initiated "Spring Into Reading": A plan for encouraging parental involvement in leisure time reading activities in the Wentzville R-IV School District.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

Briefly stated, the program consisted of an 8-week contractual agreement between the parent and child to spend fifteen minutes per day, five days a week in a reading activity. The contract stated that this was to be a quiet period in which the radio and television were to be turned off.

The three major objectives which we hoped to achieve were: (1) to get parents and children involved in reading activities that would reinforce the concept that reading is both necessary and pleasurable; (2) to encourage parents to provide a home environment in which reading can be practiced and skills developed; and (3) to induce the children to be self-motivated to continue reading on their own.

We first developed a sample packet comprised of all material pertaining to the program, such as parent letters, weekly record sheets, etc. This packet was presented to the Director of Elementary Education for his approval. Since we believe that in order for such a reading program to be successful we must have the approval

and cooperation of our teachers, we then submitted the packet to each grade level representative who comprised our school's reading committee. They provided us with invaluable feedback for improving the program. Our next step was to secure the incentives for the students in the program. For example, in our school district, which is located in a rural area with a total student population of about 3,000, Burger Chef and McDonalds provided coupons for free cokes and french fries. The Missouri Conservation Department provided pine seedlings and our Parent-Teacher Organization supplied stickers. These rewards were given throughout the program as incentives to keep the children reading.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM

To start the program we found it essential to develop a time-line, which clearly listed all of the important events in the program, such as halfway points, dates that parent letters would go home, dates of incentive distributions, etc. This was given to all of the teaching staff in order to insure that all participants would clearly know where they were in the program, and when each event would occur. At the same time each teacher was given a class record sheet. The class record sheet lessened paper work for the teachers, and provided a concise uniform system for determining the progress of program participants.

Initially, a parent letter was sent home to all of the parents in the elementary school, explaining the program. Along with the letter, the program contract was sent home. The parents were given approximately one week to return the signed contract if

they desired to participate. When the contracts were returned, each participant was given a coupon for a free coke from our local Burger Chef.

Meanwhile, we had distributed our student weekly record sheets (the five-petaled flower) to all of our teachers. On the Monday that the program started, the student weekly record sheets were then sent home with those who had signed up, and reading began at home. All of these record keeping sheets were to be returned to the classroom teacher on the following Monday. Each night that the child completed reading at home, they would color in one petal on the flower. When the five nights of reading were completed, the parents would sign the sheet. The child then returned the sheet to their teacher, was given a sticker as a reward, and a new student weekly record sheet to take home for the next week's reading.

When they reached the halfway point, a pep letter was sent home to all of our participants. In it, we suggested further reading activities to keep the program going at home. Also, at this time all of our students received a Jack Pine seedling from the Missouri Conservation Department, along with a short note describing the tree that they were planting, and a letter telling how to correctly plant the tree. It took us approximately one and one half days to distribute all of the seedlings as we took great care in doing so. We individually wrapped each seedling in a wet paper towel and then a plastic bag so that the roots would not dry out. Then individually each classroom was called over, and we gave a congratulatory speech to the students

encouraging them to keep on reading. We felt that this personalized attention was one essential ingredient that kept our participants reading. Most of our students know either one, or both of us, and a personalized message of congratulations really seemed to motivate them to complete the program.

The program then continued on as it had run for the first four weeks. Students were given weekly record sheets, continuing to read at home, and to bring back completed sheets weekly to their teachers.

At the end of the program, classroom record sheets were collected from all of the teachers. The total number of students completing the program was tallied. Each participant who had completed the program then received a Certificate of Accomplishment signed by the Superintendent, their building principal, classroom teacher, and us, as well as a coupon for free french fries from the local McDonald's Restaurant.

In our first year, we felt our program to be quite successful. Initially 1,095 students started the program, and 628 students completed it.

RESPONSES TO THE PROGRAM

The responses to S.I.R. came from the following participants: parents, teachers, students and administrators. Although the overwhelming response from all participants was positive, the roles each had to play on the program brought about certain unique response reactions. For this reason, we would like to deal with each separately.

PARENTS

Although one would not think that 15 minutes a night would be a difficult objective to meet, when the family is comprised of several children with varying outside interests and the aim is to have everyone read together, it becomes a juggling act with time. Some parents indicated that they solved this problem by foregoing the role model they were to play and had their children read to them while they were preparing dinner or transporting them to and from activities. Others said they sometimes "cheated" and counted ½ hour on one night as 15 minutes on two nights.

There were some parents who objected to certain parts of SIR for various reasons. Several took the time to respond and let us know their objections.

There was an expressed objection to our contract between parent and child. A parent wrote that it was "100% humanistic, and that we believe is not what our Jesus would endorse".

Another parent belonged to a national group that was attempting to clean up TV programming. In doing so, they were boycotting products which were produced by the Sponsors of these "undesirable" shows. One of our rewards happened to be produced by a company that was being boycotted. So, although there was no objection to our program, there was a definite objection to one of our program incentives.

One of the parent participants was working on her Master's program and asked our permission to do a descriptive study of SIR. Her study attempted to determine how student ability and grade level affect participation and persistence in the reading program. In

short, the study suggested that reading achievement was not a factor in determining participation in grades 1-3. However, it was a strongly significant factor in grade 4-6. Also, primary students showed more interest than intermediate students in continuing the program (McCutchen, 1982).

TEACHERS

Teacher flexibility played a part in determining completion of the program. It was our position that if a student failed to return the weekly record keeping sheet, he/she should be allowed a day or so grace. Primary teachers tended to be much more lenient in this respect. However, intermediate grade teachers believed that along with everything else, they were trying to teach their students responsibility. So, many intermediate students failed to complete the program because they didn't return their student record sheet on time.

Teachers' attitudes toward the program also influence the amount of student participation. The teachers who have indicated to us that they strongly support the program, tended to have a greater percentage of their class participate.

STUDENTS

The incentives play an important part in motivating the students to begin the program. As we were passing out seedlings to the students who earned them, we asked if they enjoyed the program and if so what did they enjoy most about it? They all seemed to like the program, but the majority said they liked it because they got to read whatever they wanted to read. So,

although the incentives seem to motivate them to begin the program, the enjoyment of the reading itself seems to motivate them to continue.

ADMINISTRATORS

Administrators, much the same as teachers, can be influential in determining amount of student participation. If the administrator believes in the program, his feelings will be transmitted to the teaching staff. Our administration was very supportive. Encouraging words to parents seemed to often "pop up" in parent bulletins.

It is important, however, that the administrators understand that the program directors may need additional time, possibly even necessitating cancelling classes periodically, (e.g. to prepare and pass out rewards and give congratulatory speeches), in order to carry the program to a successful completion. In our case, when passing out trees at the halfway point did cut in to teaching time, there appeared to be a conflict of interest between the administration and ourselves. We felt that this reflected a lack of understanding of the importance of personalized attention to the students or of the incentive and reward aspects of the program. Yet it may have also reflected a difference of opinion on the amount of time which directors should spend in implementation and when it should be spent. That is, what is the school's priority -- following a strict classroom routine and teaching schedule or fostering a desire in children to read at home with their parents?

It is best to have a complete understanding between the program directors and the administration on this point and to work out the scheduling of time to be spent in implementation from the outset.

SUMMARY

We have found the "Spring Into Reading Program" to be a very effective way of getting parents and children involved in reading activities at home. In an age when there are so many other activities besides reading which are competing for children's leisure-recreational time, this sort of parent-child involvement program seems essential. A letter from a parent of one of the second grade boys who participated in "Spring Into Reading" seems to summarize both our rationale for initiating this program and the results which we ideally hoped to achieve.

> "Our lives get so busy that we don't take time to read. Your program provided the incentive to make time. We personally enjoyed it so much! My husband and I both found it is a joy to listen to our son, Tommy, read and to observe the progress he's made this year. . . For about the first week of the program, he read to us in the evening. He was very conscientious about the 15 minute time. Then he brought home some good mystery books from the 3rd and 4th grade section of the library. He started setting an alarm clock for himself so he could wake up earlier in the morning and he asked me to read to him. We then read about 30 to 45 minutes a day. We're still reading, and Tommy has made me promise we'll do library's summer reading olympics if they have it this year. Some days are busy and tiring, but the day comes soon enough when little boys don't

ask their moms to read to them, so I'm enjoying every minute now!"

It is this sort of feedback which made our efforts seem worthwhile to us as directors of S.I.R. The utilization of home reading programs such as "Spring Into Reading" however, would appear to have broader implications nation-wide than we originally perceived. That is, arising out of experience with such programs, school districts across the country are realizing the role which parents play in the overall educational process.

As Dorothy Strickland, Professor of Education at Columbia University and past president of the International Reading Association (Strickland, 1982) writes:

> "During the past decade, the value of parent involvement has emerged as an important educational concept. Throughout the world, wherever reading programs are being started or re-examined, some type of parent involvement activities are likely to be considered. . . Research in parent involvement confirmed that comprehensive (parents serving many roles) and sustained parent involvement has a positive effect on the school's ability to do its job. The importance of parent involvement as it relates to student attitudes and academic achievement, in particular, has served to clearly establish <u>the role of parents as part of the teaching team.</u>"

Let your parents be a part of your teaching team. The parents, children and academic community will greatly benefit.

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